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Smoke gets in your eyes: Re-Reading Gender in the “Nostalgia Film”

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Abstract

Upon its release, American Graffiti (George Lucas, 1973) was much admired by critics and audiences alike. Yet, in subsequent years, the film became known for its supposed “flattening of history,” and celebration of patriarchal values. This article demonstrates that such a judgement owes much to Fredric Jameson’s historically contingent work on postmodernism, which argues that American Graffiti constitutes the paradigmatic nostalgia film. In contrast, using close textual analysis, I demonstrate that American Graffiti provides a more complex construction of the past, and of gender, than has hitherto been acknowledged. Far from blindly idealising the early 1960s, the film interrogates the processes through which the period and its gender relations come to be idealised. This article has consequences not only for our understanding of Lucas’ seminal film, but also for the American New Wave, and the “nostalgia” text.

Key Words

American Graffiti, George Lucas, nostalgia, gender, American New Wave

Released in 1973, American Graffiti (George Lucas, 1973) swiftly earned many admirers. Earning \$55 million at the box office at its first run from a budget of only \$750,000, the film was an extraordinary commercial success (DeWitt 47).¹ American Graffiti also garnered widespread critical acclaim, attracting five Oscar nominations, including Best Picture, Best Director and Best Screenplay. Nonetheless, many critics and scholars have subsequently found fault with the film, arguing that it celebrates 1960s America prior to the emergence of the feminist movement, while Fredric Jameson has famously claimed that it emblematises the loss of history in the postmodern era (Postmodernism 66). In contrast, this article argues that we need to look again at American Graffiti, now dubbed the paradigmatic “nostalgia film” (Postmodernism 67). Analysing the construction of nostalgia in Lucas’ film, I examine the complexity of its engagement with the past. Through attention to its textual details and to its presentation of gender relations, I demonstrate that the project of American Graffiti is more sophisticated than has previously been considered. In this, I work both to reposition the film among the American New Wave, and to complicate what is understood to be the creative undertaking of this loosely-auteurist movement.

Set in 1962, only eleven years prior to its 1973 release, American Graffiti portrays the early 1960s as an historical period whose practices and ideals had largely been confined to the past. The film’s very tagline, “where were you in ’62?” hails the now aged teenager of the 1960s, with the implication that the values of their adolescence are now a matter of historical record. (Ebert n. pag).² That significant changes in America’s social, cultural and political landscape had occurred between the time of the film’s setting and its release is undeniable. 1962 prefigures the assassination of President Kennedy the following year, and with it, the end of the Fifties, an era widely synonymous with prosperity, progress, and wholesomeness in the United States (Sprengler 39).³ 1962 also anticipates the “British invasion” inaugurated by the success of the Beatles, which transformed forever the American pop cultural landscape, as well

as the publication of Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique the following year. If 1962 sees America on the cusp of a seismic shift in mores, 1973 can broadly be regarded as the dissolution of that potential. By this time, the Beatles had split up, and the Vietnam War, for so long a locus of countercultural dissent, had incurred heavy American losses. As the analysis demonstrates, American Graffiti stages a complex negotiation between a nostalgia for such lost potential, and an urge for progress.

The period between 1962 and 1973 was also a crucial one for feminist activism, and the concomitant questioning of normative gender roles. American Graffiti's 1962 setting places the film's characters in the midst of nascent stirrings of feminist discontent, yet prior to the major legislative successes of the second wave. The summer of 1962 follows the establishment of the President's Commission on the Status of Women in 1961, which found that women suffered drastic inequality in all spheres of life (Harrison). Only later would national and grassroots organisations strive for women's social, political and economic equality, such that by 1973, the year of the film's release, the Supreme Court ruled that the then existent ban on abortion was unconstitutional. The period between the time of the film's setting and its cinema exhibition, then, is characterised not only by the extinguishing of countercultural potential but also radical changes in social mores particularly as they impact gender roles.

It is precisely because of the speed and extent of social change in the 1960s and 1970s that a desire to look back to the past is often perceived as a retreat from the complexities of the present. This is precisely the view of Fred Davis (1979), for whom the large number of works representing the 1950s in the 1970s constitute a retrenchment from the social upheavals of the previous decade. The works Davis highlights as part of this "nostalgia boom," such as *Happy Days* (ABC 1974-1984) and *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978) certainly appear to celebrate the period after McCarthy and before Vietnam as an innocent, prelapsarian one whose easy

certainties had yet to be undermined. In this, Davis equates representations of the past with a conservative agenda that rejects progress.

It nevertheless seems clear that nostalgia does not adequately account for the complex relationships created by these works with the past eras they represent. As Linda Hutcheon argues, nostalgia is merely one of a number of ways to look back to the past: “you can look back and reject. Or, you can look and linger longingly” (Hutcheon n. pag.). Nostalgia is indisputably associated with the latter approach. Derived from the Greek *nostos* (return) and *algos* (home), nostalgia was originally conceived as an acute form of homesickness. Only in the eighteenth century did the term acquire its contemporary meaning, so that rather than the (usually) possible wish to return to a particular place, nostalgia came to describe the impossible desire to return to a lost time, most frequently the time of one’s youth. Traces of nostalgia’s former status as a pathology are apparent in Davis’ assessment of film-making trends in the 1970s, and, as I argue, have unduly influenced the perception of American Graffiti.

Paul Grainge’s distinction between the nostalgia mood and the nostalgia mode helps to unpick the work attributed to nostalgia in works that are set in the past. The nostalgia mood, he argues, constitutes the commonplace definition of the term; a “yearning for the past” (Grainge 28). For Grainge, the nostalgia mood constitutes a form of “idealised remembrance,” such that the nostalgic’s longing for the past both results from and further contributes to, its idealisation (28). Nostalgia must therefore be regarded as a self-perpetuating phenomenon. Complicating matters, Susan Stewart argues that since the nostalgic must know that the era they so long for is irretrievably lost, they must be “enamoured of distance, not of the referent itself (145).” The affective dimension of nostalgia consists not only in mourning, but in perpetually pursuing the inevitable loss of time. Those afflicted by the nostalgia mood could therefore grieve the loss of any era.

In contrast to the emotional resonance of the nostalgia mood, the nostalgia mode is predominantly associated with the work of Fredric Jameson, and refers to manifestations of nostalgia in popular culture (Grainge 28). Jameson conceives the nostalgia mode as the prevailing cultural form of the postmodern era, which signals its positioning in what he calls “late capitalism” (*Postmodernism* 66). His conception of the postmodern as the latest in a sequence of epochs is significant, since Jameson himself appears to be nostalgic for the modern era, in which individual styles flourished to such an extent that they could be effectively subverted through parody (1991). Indeed, for Jameson, the advent of postmodernism has brought with it the demise of the bourgeois ego as a unique self, and with it, the death of the artist. Consequently, subversive parody has been supplanted by anodyne pastiche. Unlike Richard Dyer (2007), for whom the discrepancies and distortions of pastiche engender complex structures of affect, Jameson claims that pastiche is merely “blank parody” that demonstrates the collapse not only of history but of historicity (1991). What remains is the “nostalgia film,” which holds the promise of representing the past, yet instead conveys only a sense of “‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of image” (19). That Jameson reserves this condemnation, and the designation of “nostalgia film” for American Graffiti has substantially contributed towards a critical consensus that deems the film nostalgic.⁴

Jameson’s view that American Graffiti constitutes a regressive amalgam of pastiche images of the past has been a major influence on the film’s reception. Yet, as Michael D Dwyer observes, Jameson’s interpretation of Lucas’ film is itself historically contingent (57). Writing in 1984, Jameson is very much in the midst of the “nostalgia boom” of the 1970s and 1980s, as is Davis, whose influential Yearning for Yesterday was published in 1979. Their perspectives on American Graffiti are somewhat elucidated by Stephen Tropiano’s work on Grease (Randal Kleiser, 1978). Significantly, Tropiano positions American Graffiti alongside Grease as part of a “subgenre of nostalgic-themed comedies and dramas” about coming-of-age,

which includes The Lords of Flatbush (Martin Davidson, Stephen Verona, 1974), Our Time (Peter Hyams, 1974), Cooley High (Michael Schultz, 1975), September 30 1955 (James Bridges, 1977), and The Wanderers (Philip Kaufman, 1979) (6). A quick glance at these films' release dates reveals that they all emerged in the wake of American Graffiti. Given the profitability of Lucas' film (from a low-budget, with no obviously bankable stars), it is hardly surprising that it would have spawned a succession of imitators. Such a pattern is typical of the youth-oriented film cycle, in which the success of one exemplar leads to a short-lived proliferation of numerous imitators (Klein). But it should not mean that American Graffiti must be regarded through the lens of films created in its aftermath.

In contrast to the films that Tropiano identifies, Dwyer observes that at the time of its release, American Graffiti was considered part of the American New Wave. To illustrate, he quotes The New York Times, whose review hailed American Graffiti as "the most important American movie since Five Easy Pieces, maybe since Bonnie and Clyde" (Dempsey qtd. In Dwyer 57). As a result of the overwhelming success of his later Star Wars films (1977; 1980; 1983; 1999; 2002; 2005), the director of American Graffiti, George Lucas, is now predominantly associated with the high-concept blockbuster. However, it is clear that his prior positioning as part of the 1970s film school generation of film-makers, alongside Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola (who produced American Graffiti) was central to the film's initial reception. And far from upholding the ideals of the past, these directors were principally concerned with debunking and destabilising American values. In this context, it seems unlikely that Lucas' allusive invocation of the past would be an unthinking one.

What is apparent in the above discussion is a clear disparity between critics' discussions of American Graffiti at the time of its release, and subsequent treatments of the film. For many film scholars, the object of nostalgia in American Graffiti or indeed many other supposed nostalgia texts is unfettered patriarchy. Indeed, Timothy Shary argues that the film's principal

appeal is to young men who are invited to marvel at the power they once held over their female contemporaries (45). Elsewhere, Barbara Creed maintains that it is the presentation of “true heroes and distressed heroines,” that is, the impression that the past contained stable, clearly defined gender roles that have subsequently been undermined, that is the key draw of the nostalgia text (54). As well as illuminating our understanding of the film’s construction of the past through close textual analysis, this article complicates the assertion that American Graffiti celebrates traditional and patriarchal gender roles, through attention to the female characters, and to their heterosexual relationships.

It should be acknowledged that other scholars, notably Lynn Spigel and Hilary Radner, have undertaken analyses of gender roles in other supposedly nostalgic texts, such as Mad Men (ABC 2007-2015) and Dirty Dancing (Emile Ardolino, 1987). Significantly, like American Graffiti, Dirty Dancing, and the first few seasons of Mad Men, are set in the early 1960s. For Spigel, Mad Men cultivates a nostalgia for the ‘pre-feminist’ era, one in which nascent undercurrents of proto-feminist discontent were apparent, but women were yet to push for more substantive changes (272). Similarly, Radner argues that Dirty Dancing anticipates the need for later feminist victories, particularly in its portrayal of abortion. However, she also asserts that the most radical transformations of gender relations, which occurred in the period following the film’s conclusion but before the audience’s viewing in the late 1980s, are relegated to “feminism’s future past” (137). Both studies observe that nostalgia texts can provide a complex treatment of gender relations in the past. Yet the gender relations of American Graffiti continue to evade scrutiny. Even Spigel, who provides a nuanced account of Mad Men, is content to dismiss Lucas’ film as an uncomplicated vision of “girls in poodle skirts sipping malts at the soda shop and boys cruising in fast cars” (72).

This article argues that the construction of gender, and secondarily, of class distinctions in American Graffiti is far from nostalgic. Disputing the argument that loss is the engine behind

an idealised longing for the past, I will show that the film portrays moribund models of masculinity, and heterosexual coupledness, while also demonstrating that they are not to be mourned. What is more, through close textual analysis, I complicate the widespread perception that the film consists only in a bland reification of the pop culture of the past. My aim is not to reposition American Graffiti as a feminist text; Pauline Kael's assertion that Lucas' film marginalises the experiences of young women and ethnic minorities remains undeniable (55). Nonetheless, by examining the intersections between the film's construction of gender and its representation of the past, I demonstrate that American Graffiti is more complex than has previously been acknowledged, an argument that has consequences not only for the positioning of Lucas' film within the American New Wave, but also for other nostalgia texts that have been similarly maligned.

Stasis and Mobility at Mel's Drive-in

American Graffiti begins at Mel's Drive-In, which establishes the film's suburban American setting, and provides a point of convergence for this disparate group of teens based in Modesto, California. The neon-lit drive-in, sound-tracked by Bill Haley and the Comets' "Rock Around the Clock" is the precisely the kind of broad brush-strokes approach to "Fifties" popular culture that Jameson finds so objectionable in American Graffiti. The reflective, glossy surfaces of the drive-in and the cars' bodywork seem to repel our gaze, foreclosing our ability to access the past, while "Rock Around the Clock", being released in 1955, seems an unlikely choice for a film released seven years thereafter (Shumway 41). However, the way in which both setting and music are deployed in these opening scenes disputes Jameson's claims that the film offers an indiscriminate vision of uncritical "pastness". Indeed, the drive-in setting is in fact an apt one, since it captures the twin forces of stasis and mobility, which are foremost in the characters' minds as they consider their futures. Mel's Drive-In is moreover a space of equality. While the cars they drive, and their opportunities for advancement are largely class-bound, the

drive-in welcomes Terry the Toad (Charles Martin-Smith) just as it does class president, Steve Bolander (Ron Howard – credited here as Ronny Howard).

The question of “Rock Around the Clock” is a more complex one. Aurally, the film opens to indistinct snatches of voice and music – the sounds of a radio being tuned in – before finding and settling on XERB, a “border blaster” station so called because while catering to the American youth market, their operations were based in Mexico in order to bypass US broadcasting regulations (Dwyer 65). Evoking the sound and experience of tuning in a radio, XERB is marked as a distinct choice from a wider selection of options on the radio’s spectrum. By implication, the narrative that follows depicts just one version of events, while a number of other possible stories remain unseen. Consequently, while Kael is correct that American Graffiti does not dwell on the experiences of those who are not young, white men, the film does at least acknowledge the possibility of other experiences of the past, even if it ultimately chooses not to portray them. Significantly, too, the choice of the radio station, and Wolfman Jack’s musical selections found there, disputes Jameson’s claim that the film plunders indiscriminately from early rock and roll. Rather, the film’s opening exemplifies Hutcheon’s contention that the postmodern exposes that history is always “unstable, contextual, relational and provisional”, despite its pretence to a single, universal meaning (Politics of Postmodernism 64). From the very beginning, the spectator is invited to consider what alternative histories might be side-lined in choosing this particular radio station.

As David Shumway points out, “Rock Around the Clock” is widely hailed as the “first rock and roll song,” immediately evoking the inauguration of a particular generation and its counterculture (41). “Rock Around the Clock” also recalls the beginning of Blackboard Jungle, (Richard Brooks, 1955), whose opening sequence featured the song. The violence depicted in Brooks’ film, combined with Haley’s call to a collective youth culture, reportedly provoked isolated cases of riots following initial screenings (Simmons 383). In contrast, the setting sun

at Mel's Drive-In indicates that the type of male youth rebellion portrayed in Blackboard Jungle, and celebrated in "Rock Around the Clock," may no longer be possible. However, as I argue in relation to the characterisation of John Milner (Paul Le Mat), this is no straightforward evocation of the nostalgia mood. Rather, American Graffiti looks forward to a move away from individual, atomised instances of rebellion, to a mass counterculture with the capacity to bring about widespread political and social change.

In this opening scene, there is a disjunction between the long, still shot of Mel's Drive-In backlit only by the setting sun, and the exuberance of the song's tempo and lyrics. While Haley urges movement, literally to "rock around the clock," the image his song purportedly illustrates is morosely static, and defies the song's energy. Just as the music is placed at one remove, being marked as a choice on a particular radio station, so too the length of the long, still shot of Mel's Drive-In places the spectator at a distance, such that viewers are not able wholly to immerse themselves in this quintessentially Fifties locale.⁵ The opening scenes of American Graffiti make clear both that access to the past is always constructed in the present, and that, despite the affective lure of the nostalgia mood, full submersion into the past is impossible.

INSERT Figure 1 Mel's Drive-In

The music gradually becomes less prominent as the camera pans to the main car park to provide a roll-call of the film's leading players, each of whom is heralded by their respective vehicles. Jack DeWitt draws attention to the significance of these cars for the characterisation of their owners. Terry is first to appear, arriving clumsily on a white Vespa. Later charitably described by Debbie (Candy Clark) as "almost a motorcycle," Terry's scooter signals his emasculation, to be temporarily alleviated when Steve lends him his customised 1958 Impala. For DeWitt, the Impala foretells Steve's conventionality, since its tuck-and-roll upholstery and

white paint job demonstrate good taste and expense, though little sense of originality or personality (48). In turn, DeWitt observes Laurie's (Cindy Williams) arrival in a 1958 Edsel, a family car widely held as a commercial and technological failure in the American automotive industry (48). Curt's (Richard Dreyfuss) Citroën 2CV positions him exotically outside American teenage car culture and anticipates his later departure from Modesto. Lastly, John's customised yellow 1932 Ford Deuce is far older than the other cars, and, DeWitt claims, was the definitive hot rod car (48). The evocation of these period details is consequently not incidental; these vehicles are freighted with meaning about the film's key personalities.

The characters' cars also tell us about the class positions they occupy, and with them, their chances of leaving Modesto. There is a clear distinction to be made between Steve and Curt, both of whom have acquired prestigious college scholarships, and Terry and John, who must remain in Modesto.⁶ The acuity of the class differences shown throughout American Graffiti alongside the distinct lack of opportunity for the characters to improve their lives, disputes the claim that 1962 sees the end of an era for which audiences should be nostalgic.⁷ Indeed, given that cars are conventionally regarded as avatars of independence and mobility, there is no small irony that the characters use theirs only to drive around the same streets, converging in the same spot night after night.

The over-signification of the characters' cars calls to be read in terms of Dyer's, rather than Jameson's, conception of pastiche. In contrast to Jameson's derisive description of blank parody devoid of any capacity for critique, Dyer suggests that pastiche is "an imitation you are meant to know is an imitation (11)." The clarity of allusions to 1950s car culture, and the multitude of high-shine surfaces in this opening scene hold similarities to the highly-stylised evocation of the 1950s seen in Todd Haynes' Far From Heaven (2002), which Dyer regards as pastiche. For Dyer, the complex affectivity of Haynes' film can be attributed at once to its painstaking re-creation of the 1950s melodramas of Douglas Sirk and Max Ophüls, and to the

discrepancies and distortions in that representation (175). The potent combination of similitude and difference, Dyer argues, speaks to the uncertainties of the past, which can never be fully resolved. The opening scenes of American Graffiti likewise demonstrate the shaky ground on which our perceptions of the past rest. Mel's Drive-In sets the tone for the complex construction of masculinities throughout American Graffiti, which expresses affective loss of this era, while also showing critical distance from its mores.

Rebels of the past and future

John Milner embodies two figures of American masculinity that by 1962 had become largely outmoded, and in 1973 were very much confined to the past: the Western hero, and the juvenile delinquent.⁸ Examining his evocation of Western hero, there are clear echoes in John's aspiration to possess the "bitchinest car in the valley," and many a Western hero's "fastest guns in the West," as James Curtis observes (596). Just as the ageing protagonists of Shane (George Stevens, 1953) and The Gunfighter (Henry King, 1950) find that their powers have waned in the passing of the West, so too John discovers that the demise of Modesto's drag racing subculture diminishes his own significance. That his long-standing tenure is likely to be overthrown by the film's conclusion is prefigured by the growling sounds of Bob Falfa's (Harrison Ford) black 1955 Chevy heard in the distance from Mel's Drive-In.

John's increasingly precarious status in Modesto recalls the Western hero. Yet the iconography that surrounds him, not least the tight white t-shirt, blue jeans and his "piss-yellow deuce coupé," evoke the 1950s juvenile delinquent, most obviously James Dean in Rebel Without a Cause (Nicholas Ray, 1955) (Kline 72). The high saturation colour of American Graffiti, showcased by the vibrancy of John's Ford Deuce recalls the lavish Warner Color of Ray's melodrama. However, whereas Dean was a celebrated figure, canonised as an icon of teen rebellion, John is not cast as an aspirational figure here. In contrast to Dean, whose lithe boyish physique emphasised his youthfulness, John, being visibly older than other characters,

bulges paunchily out of his t-shirt. Discussing their plans to leave for college, Steve's most persuasive argument is that staying in Modesto might cause Curt to "end up like John," an outcome that is clearly to be avoided. There is consequently pathos in John's vociferous claim that he will remain in Modesto "having fun as usual," as he contrasts his fortunes with those of college-bound Steve and Curt. While associated with high-speed drag racing, John is a figure of perpetual stasis, from which he can see no escape. John is not only cast outside of his time, but is a figure whose characterisation calls into question constructions of masculinity that are idealised through their short-term instantiation, such as Dean.⁹

INSERT Figure 2 John (Paul Le Mat) and his vibrant yellow Ford Deuce

The sense that John embodies roles that are no longer viable is compounded by the presence of Carol (Mackenzie Philips), a precocious 14-year-old who John is duped into taking with him in his car. Carol's youth provides a counterpoint to John's age. Unlike the other characters, who revel in their memories of "the good times," she is not yet old enough to have acquired their taste for nostalgia. Carol's different choice of music also reveals the film's ethos concerning changes in youth culture between the 1950s and the 1970s. When she changes the radio station to select one playing the Beach Boys, John objects, stating "I hate all that surfer shit. Rock and roll's been going downhill ever since Buddy Holly died." John's preference for Buddy Holly, who died in 1959, signals not only that his tastes are outdated, but also his alignment with 1950s youth culture. Thomas Doherty's account of the era observes that early rock and roll music of the type exemplified by Buddy Holly, in tandem with the juvenile delinquent, who supposedly comprised its audience, were regarded as unknowable, unpredictable and as part of a perceived moral decline (42-44). In contrast, Carol is affiliated with the Beach Boys, whose musical fortunes were still on the ascendant in 1962.

The waning powers of the juvenile delinquent himself are brought into focus when a police officer orders John to pull over. The conversation that ensues reveals that John is a familiar figure to the police. Indeed, when he passes Carol the citation handed to him by the officer, she discovers a glut of other, screwed-up citations in the compartment of the passenger door, leading her to exclaim, “you’re a real JD!” Carol’s declaration demonstrates the extent to which understanding of the juvenile delinquent had developed by 1962. Far from the unknowable danger that such figures presented in Dean’s mid-1950s heyday, the routine manner with which the police officer deals with John, and the ease with which she can identify him as conforming to a particular type, reveal that by 1962, the teen rebel had become known, documented and categorised, and therefore not nearly so unknowable and dangerous. This scene appears to indicate that with John, the subversive power of youth culture itself is in decline, having been absorbed wholesale into the mainstream.

John’s and Carol’s respective musical tastes are central to identifying what is at stake in their contrasting embodiments of youth culture. If we loosely map John’s preference for Buddy Holly onto his embodiment of youth culture of the 1950s, the role of “cool” emerges as a key construct. In their study of this central concept, Dick Pountain and David Robins identify James Dean as “cool’s first martyr” as the result both of his untimely death, and his embodiment of youthful teen rebellion (19). Dean, of course, was never identified with any particular movement. Rather, his star persona signalled rebellion in a more general, nebulous sense. It is in this context that we should read Pountain and Robins’ definition of cool as a “permanent state of private rebellion” (19, my emphasis). Rebellion in this mode is confined to a stance indicating an individual’s disapproval of authority. And indeed, Doherty’s historical account of 1950s teen rebellion as characterised by localised confrontations with authority figures supports the connection between cool and contained forms of rebellion in that period

(42-44). In American Graffiti, it appears that the roles of cool, and of individualised rebellion, have exhausted their potential.

Carol's preference for the Beach Boys over Buddy Holly prefigures Brian Wilson's later musical experimentation, which was contemporaneous with the well-documented youth-led mass movements of the later 1960s and 1970s. The contrast between John and Carol can consequently be conceived as a move "from contraculture to counterculture" (Doherty 44). That is, as a change from unfocused rebellion of a few isolated individuals, towards mass movements that would bring about a generational shift in society's mores.¹⁰ American Graffiti does not exactly celebrate the demise of the teen rebel in the Fifties mould. However, it does seem to look forward to a future that holds greater possibilities for subverting the dominant order. Perhaps unexpectedly, given the film's masculinist reputation, it is a young woman who seems to embody this possibility in Lucas' film.

The pair's trip to the car scrapyard, tellingly dubbed, "the graveyard," further reveals the film's perspective on the decline of 1950s male youth rebellion. John is wistful as he passes the mournful spectre of cars piled high around them, many of which also represent the death of a fellow drag racer. The scene makes clear John's awareness that over time he has reached the zenith of his abilities as a racer in Modesto, and that the only path available to him is decline and defeat. Despite the pathos in the film's portrayal of the demise of the model of youth culture instantiated by John, American Graffiti conveys that the youth rebellion he embodies is unlikely to lead to lasting change, with the result that we are not to bemoan the passing of this construction of masculinity. In contrast, Carol's youth and quick wit seem to look forward favourably to the possibilities of youth culture in the diegetic future. I maintain that American Graffiti is not a feminist film. Yet it is noticeable that it is a younger teenage girl who is marked as a figure of hope for American youth. While she is a relatively marginal figure, American Graffiti certainly indicates that the future will be shaped by those in her image, rather than that

of John. What the scene shows, then, is not nostalgia in the mould proposed by either Grainge or Jameson, but a nostalgia for potential. That is, for a time when social progress was due to take place in the near future.

Going steady in American Graffiti

In the film's two couples, Steve and Laurie, and Terry and Debbie, American Graffiti provides a reflection on gender relations within heterosexuality, which were subject to so much scrutiny in the 1960s and 1970s. Shary's contention that Lucas' film, in tandem with many others that represent the past in the 1970s and 1980s, harks back to a time when "men still felt a sense of superiority over women" casts the film's couples in a conservative light (45). However, examining these relationships over the course of the film, I argue that American Graffiti shows characters coming to terms with increased sexual freedoms, which, following FDA approval of the contraceptive pill in 1960, were starting to become apparent by 1962 (110). More significantly still, close analysis of these couples disputes the claim that in contrast to those of the present day, gender roles of the past were simple and undisputed.

As "former class president and current head cheerleader," Steve and Laurie are presented as an idealised couple. Central to their potential to be read as nostalgic is the casting of Ron Howard as Steve. In 1973, Howard was principally known for his role as Opie Taylor, the son of Sheriff Andy Taylor (Andy Griffith) in The Andy Griffith Show (CBS 1960-1968), which cemented Howard's image as an embodiment of boyish wholesomeness.¹¹ In American Graffiti too, Steve's short-sleeved gingham shirt and beige slacks combine with his red hair and freckles to create an appearance of child-like innocence that jars with his behaviour in the film. It seems significant that Howard's colouring aligns him with more recent female child stars, such as Molly Ringwald and Lindsay Lohan, whose youthful star personae sees them forever held on the threshold of adulthood in audiences' minds. Gaylyn Studlar argues that "juvenated" female stars in the Classical Hollywood era, that is, those who communicate

through the medium of youthfulness, signify ideological continuity (3). The female child star is thus implicitly a figure of idealised nostalgia. In contrast, while Steve is figured as “Joe College,” an embodiment of youthful, middle-class success to be celebrated, American Graffiti also amply displays his shortcomings as a partner for Laurie. The film thus takes up the appearance and costuming of wholesome, boyish masculinity of the early 1960s only to highlight the hypocrisies and shortcomings of that persona.

Steve’s limitations are encountered almost as soon as we are introduced to the character at Mel’s Drive-In. Sitting alongside Laurie in the Impala, Steve clumsily opens a discussion about their relationship to date, and its future. When he hesitates, Laurie correctly guesses that Steve is “leading up to something kind of big,” but mistakenly infers that he is plucking up the courage to propose marriage, not to announce his plans to “date other people at college.” Steve is positioned in the foreground here in the driving seat, seeming to grant priority to his perspective. Yet when Laurie stops eating, her shock at this development is clear, even as she masks her disappointment by briskly removing her “juvenile” necklace, which had served as a symbol of their relationship. We see in this scene the evident imbalances, double standards, and entrapment in the sexual scripts that are available to them. American Graffiti portrays these two characters on the cusp of the sexual revolution, which granted both women and men unprecedented sexual freedom. The film’s evocation of 1962 is not arbitrary, then, as Jameson claims. Rather, American Graffiti looks back to specific time when the sexual revolution was imminent.

Reading Steve as an incarnation of typically masculine promiscuity and Laurie as a stand-in for a dominant, female desire for monogamy and stability is tempting. However, at the hop, American Graffiti demonstrates that Steve’s and Laurie’s attitudes are theirs alone, and should not be unquestionably understood to represent their generation of high-schoolers. As with the use of the radio tuning into XERB at the film’s beginning, American Graffiti shows

that there is no single account of the past, nor one clear vision of its gender relations. Steve and Laurie independently confide in their friends about their discussion at Mel's Drive-In. Steve's knowing smirk with Eddie (Tim Crowley) confirms his intention to "screw around" while away at college, one he appears to share with his friend. In this case, Steve's attitude does indeed seem to be typical. In contrast, Laurie's conversation with Peg (Kathleen Quinlan) reveals that they possess considerably diverging attitudes to dating. Peg advises that Laurie's status as senior prom queen will ensure that a number of other, possible boyfriends will be available to her, while Laurie sighs wistfully, "I just wish I could go with him or something." To this, Peg rolls her eyes dismissively, stating, "Jeez, Laurie, come on," as she walks out of frame and back to the dance. Laurie's desire for marriage and monogamy before she has completed high school seems to be regarded as embarrassingly retrograde even in 1962. Laurie is portrayed as uncharacteristic of this generation's young women. While only Steve and Laurie's relationship is shown in any depth at the hop, the film highlights the plurality of gender relations in the past.

It is significant not only that Laurie's urge for monogamy and marriage is presented as unusual, but also that she is also portrayed as head cheerleader and senior prom queen. As Roz Kaveney's study of the teen movie observes, these positions typically denote an elite standing for girls (85). Laurie's stance is therefore to be privileged over that of Peg, of whom we see relatively little. American Graffiti thus presents multiple examples of femininity, while making clear that only one of these models is to be idealised. As such, the film reveals the mechanisms through which historians "suppress, repeat, subordinate, highlight and order" the reality of the past to provide a single, coherent account of a given period (Politics of Postmodernism 65). In so doing, American Graffiti subtly reveals some of the mechanisms – class privilege and popularity – through which particular ideas about the past come to prominence and endure.

The stability of our access to the past is further undermined in the evocative scenes of Steve and Laurie's slow waltz. The hop provides the only space from which we temporarily

escape Wolfman Jack's pervasive diegetic soundtrack, which is replaced by a live band, Flash Cadillac and the Continental Kids. However, for the slow waltz, a teacher selects and plays the Platters' record, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," the opening refrains of which are heard as Laurie and Steve are invited to take to the stage. The use of diegetic, recorded music, which, as the dance develops, becomes subsumed into non-diegetic sound, signals a conscious movement away from the ordinariness of the annual freshman hop, and towards the myth of idealised heterosexual romance.¹² Despite knowing that their relationship is surely over, Laurie repeatedly entices Steve to smile, aware that the pair of them are presented as an aspirational ideal for the other students.

The idealised promise of heterosexual romance as instantiated in Hollywood cinema is also referenced in this scene. Although a cover version is played here, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" recalls the seemingly effortless compatibility in Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers' dance to another version of the song in the climactic scenes of Roberta (William A Seiter, 1935). It is unlikely that Roberta would have been familiar to much of American Graffiti's 1973 audience. Yet Lucas' film education and the restlessly allusive qualities that have been widely discussed in relation to other examples of his work mean that Roberta is almost certainly part of the film's frame of reference.¹³ Astaire and Rogers' dance exemplifies the idealised heterosexuality that Rick Altman observes in the studio-era musical, where sexual compatibility is portrayed through apparently spontaneous – yet flawlessly executed – song and dance numbers (84). In contrast, this dance sees the couple sniping at one another, while Laurie holds back tears. There is a similar disjunction between the Platters' music and their lyrics. While the singer's evocative vocal quality and the song's gentle rhythm seemingly create to ideal conditions for a romantic slow dance, the lyrics persistently claim that "all who love are blind," presenting romance as a state of self-deception and inevitable disillusionment.

The scene thus acknowledges the powerful promise of romance, while affirming that it is all too impermanent.

The characters' unreliable memory undermines the stability of our access to the past still further. During the dance, Steve claims that he initiated their relationship and that their first kiss occurred at the canyon. However, Laurie reminds him that it was she who asked Steve out, on "backwards day," – itself a revealing indicator of the period's gender politics – and that their first kiss occurred at the lake. The instability of memory, and the consequences for the retrospective construction of history are demonstrated in the scene's editing. The film cuts between a medium shot of the couple dancing, a privileged position that allows us to see that Laurie is crying as she clutches Steve, and a long shot of the pair from the presumed perspective of the other students at the hop, from which we can see only a couple sharing a loving embrace. Given the numbers in the crowd, it is likely that this is the version of events that would be recounted by the majority of students recalling the 1962 high school hop. What is more, the *mise-en-scène* of the dance strongly suggests the possibility of distortion, as a spotlight frequently shines directly into the camera, dazzling the spectator and obscuring their view of the dance. As such, American Graffiti exemplifies how multiple perspectives may be formed on the same event. Rather than blocking our access to the past, the film exposes how, to paraphrase The Platters, smoke gets in our eyes such that one prevailing version of events comes to mask the dismal reality of Laurie and Steve's slow waltz.

"Girls don't pay, guys pay!"

In contrast to Laurie and Steve, who are at least superficially presented as an ideal high-school couple, the evident inadequacies of the film's other couple, Terry and Debbie, constitute a pastiche of the teen dating rituals of the period. Unlike Steve and Laurie, whose relationship is of some months standing, Terry only encounters Debbie when he borrows Steve's Impala for his first experience of cruising. In an interview with Steve Farber shortly after the release of

American Graffiti, Lucas muses on his portrayal of cruising as unique to American teenage culture in the 1950s and 1960s. Training an anthropological gaze on the phenomenon, he argues that “the whole teenage mating ritual ... It’s really more interesting than primitive Africa or ancient New Guinea – and much, much weirder” (qtd. in Farber 6). It is in this context that we should view Terry’s cruising experiences, which convey both the promise and the various humiliations of the practice.

Del Shannon’s “Runaway” provides the soundtrack for sweeping crane shots over the streets of Modesto, which relish in the cars’ lavish chrome detailing and the spectacle of teenage social rituals. This is the sphere from which Terry, with only a Vespa to his name, was formerly excluded, and the delight that he is finally able to participate in this practice is obvious from his facial expression, seen through the oversized windshield of Steve’s car. Here, the full promise of cruising is in evidence. Nonetheless, there is a measure of irony in using “Runaway” as the scene’s soundtrack. While cars doubtless afford these teenagers a measure of independence and individualism, the film emphasises the repetitiveness of the practice, as characters drive circuits around their home town. Terry’s inexperience at the practice is telling. When he attempts to engage in some competitive drag racing at a set of traffic lights, he mistakes the signal, and must glumly reverse back into position. In turn, when the lights change, Terry stalls the car so he is in fact the last to pull away from the junction. The portrayal of cruising culture is ultimately ambivalent. Lucas is clearly fascinated by the practice, and its specificity to a particular time and place which has now been lost. Yet its portrayal as ultimately repetitive and routine, rife with potential humiliations, and the spectre of sexual assault, ultimately prevents cruising from being wholly celebrated.

One way in which cruising does live up to Terry’s expectations is in meeting Debbie. Whereas Terry’s boyish, bespectacled appearance marks him as an inadequate embodiment of masculinity, Debbie is portrayed as a hyperbolically feminine. As Terry watches her from

within the Impala, the audience is invited to share his perspective and to take in her appearance. Debbie's blue and white patterned dress, overlaid with a cropped, white cardigan, follows the model of the cinched-in waist and wide, billowing skirt, which characterised the silhouette of Christian Dior's New Look. Introduced in Paris in 1947, this style was widely considered passé by the 1950s, and was more outdated still by 1962 (Bruzzi 163). In contrast to the pared-down clothing worn by Carol and Laurie, Debbie totters on kitten heels in a full face of make-up, bearing an arresting bouffant of platinum blonde hair. As Terry states excitedly, Debbie is a "real babe" and, like the driver of the white Thunderbird whom Curt fruitlessly pursues, is marked as an embodiment of spectacular femininity.

Debbie's stipulations for what constitutes an ideal partner lampoon the era's presumed norms of gendered behaviour. As she accepts a ride from Terry, Debbie is extremely specific in what she requires from him: he must possess a good-looking car, ideally with tuck-and-roll upholstery, drive aggressively and pay for all food and alcohol. The unlikelihood that Terry will be able to live up to these expectations is apparent to the audience from his inept performances cruising, and becomes clear for Debbie at an off-license, where he is unable to pass as an adult to purchase alcohol, and another customer absconds with his money. He must therefore submit to the worst humiliation of all; asking Debbie for money. Aghast at this tampering with the natural order of things, Debbie pronounces, "girls don't pay, *guys* pay!" Nonetheless, she hands over the money, destabilising the fixity of the gendered expectations of which, only seconds before, she had seemed so certain. Later, when Terry confesses that he had lied about his impressive collection of cars, and "hunting ponies," Debbie once again rewrites her expectations of a male partner to accommodate him, remarking that "a scooter is almost a motorcycle, and I just love motorcycles." Debbie thus undermines the supposed stability of gender roles in the past, disputing the claim that they were ever simple and undisputed.

Perhaps most significantly for the film's portrayal of the early 1960s, Debbie is shown to possess the ability to reconstruct the recent past. Contradicting her angry, dismayed reaction to the evening's events, which saw the pair lose the Impala to a gang, who then beat up Terry when he attempts to get the vehicle back, and has to be saved by John, Debbie states that she had a "great time". An evening in Terry's company, she claims, is an experience that she would be happy to repeat. Although many characters lament an idealised past in American Graffiti, only the events of Debbie's recollection are actually shown on screen. On this occasion alone, then, the audience are able to assess the veracity of the vision of the past being presented on screen. Itemising their misadventures, Debbie notes that she and Terry "saw a hold-up, got your car stolen, and then [...] got into this really bitchin' fight. I really had a good time." Following such a calamitous evening, Debbie's romanticised recollection should be understood both to bring into question the reminiscences of other characters, and to pastiche the process through which the past – however catastrophic – may be idealised.

Leaving Modesto

American Graffiti stages Curt's coming-of-age and consequent decision to leave Modesto. While Lucas describes all four of the male leads as representing stages of his own adolescent development, Curt seems to stand in for his attainment of adulthood (Farber 6-7). At Mel's Drive-In, Curt's distinctly foreign Citroën 2CV places him at a remove from the signifying economy of the town's car culture, and foretells his departure from Modesto at the film's conclusion. Yet Curt's decision is one over which he agonises, and he seeks the advice of a number of characters, among whom sympathetic teacher, Mr Wolfe (Terence McGovern) and quasi-mythical DJ, Wolfman Jack (himself). The lupine tie between these two, otherwise disparate men reveals their shared status for Curt as sympathetic adults whom the teen respects. While both characters extol the benefits of leaving town to try new things, their stature is

swiftly diminished. As a result, while there is an inevitability in Curt's departure from Modesto, moving on, in itself is not wholly endorsed by the film.

Curt is initially considerably more ambivalent than Steve about their imminent departure for college, and seeks further reassurance from Mr. Wolfe, who is supervising at the hop. Of course, that Curt attends his old high-school hop "to remember the good times" is a reflection of his resistance to moving to the next phase of his life. Mr Wolfe, for his part, is initially enthusiastic about his single semester away at Middlebury College, Vermont, before he claims that, not being "the competitive type," he soon returned to Modesto. Their discussion is interrupted by a female student, whose over-familiarity with Mr Wolfe makes clear that the teacher is involved in a sexual relationship with the girl. There is no mistaking Curt's disillusion with his former mentor, who is revealed to be a lecherous, middle-aged man who preys on the misguided adulation of teenage girls. Contrary to those scholars who argue that American Graffiti celebrates the patriarchal dominance of the past, the film instead diminishes Mr Wolfe's stature and brings his advice into question.

Curt's second role model, Wolfman Jack, is also problematised when Curt visits the radio station to request a dedication to the mysterious Thunderbird driver (Suzanne Somers credited as "Blonde in T-Bird"), for whom he has spent the evening searching. The DJ's distinctive, rasping voice pervades individual cars and the non-diegetic soundtrack alike to create what Shumway calls a "nostalgic sonic space" (28). The Wolfman's faceless, yet ubiquitous presence makes him the object of feverish speculation among Modesto's teens. Carol claims that he "broadcasts from a plane that flies around and around in circles," while rebel gang, the Pharaohs, debate whether his programme is transmitted from the Mexican border, or indeed if, as one (correctly) argues, his studio is located just outside the town. The hearsay surrounding Wolfman Jack constructs the DJ as a glamorous, mythic figure, who embodies the hedonistic promise of early 1960s youth culture.

INSERT Figures 3 and 4 alongside one another. The Wolfman as myth and reality.

Curt tracks down Wolfman Jack in a small, isolated radio station at the edge of town. The darkness at Modesto's town limits, punctured only by the dim lights of the station, and the headlamps of the 2CV indicate the related mysteries of what lies beyond Modesto's dark fringes and in Curt's future. As he enters, a glass wall divides him from the DJ, obscuring his face to create the emblematic silhouette seen in Figure 3. When granted access to the studio itself, Curt discovers that the man in the studio is not the Wolfman, but an employee charged with playing the DJ's recorded voice, such that "the Wolfman is everywhere." Nonetheless, the man is keen to play up the Wolfman's mystique, referring admiringly to "the places he's been, the things he's seen." As Curt leaves the studio, he discovers that the studio employee really was the Wolfman. His explanation of the DJ's absence demonstrates his need to create a mythical persona for himself, one that the sight of him eating rapidly defrosting popsicles alone in an isolated studio would soon dispel. Like Mr Wolfe, the Wolfman's advice to Curt to experience the world is marred not only by his petty duplicity, but by the diminished figure he now presents.

The collapse of the Wolfman's enigmatic persona follows a number of revelations that occur in quick succession. That is, when Terry confesses that he is the owner of a Vespa, not of a collection of luxury cars; when John realises that he would have lost his drag race to Bob Falga, yet resolves to continue the practice for Terry's benefit, and Curt understands that he will never discover the identity of the elusive Thunderbird driver. Taken together, American Graffiti portrays the moment in which a particular "fantasy of innocence" was permanently ruptured (Dwyer 77). The perceived wholesomeness of Curt himself is undermined when he enables the Pharaohs to rob the fruit machines belonging to one of his scholarship donors, and ties the bumper of a police car chassis to a road barrier. It appears that we can remain no longer in the illusions of the Fifties but must move into the upheavals of the later 1960s and 1970s.

Once Curt reaches the decision to leave Modesto, the film moves quickly to his departure, cutting immediately to his arrival at the airfield where his friends and family have assembled to bid him farewell. The contrast between the darkness in which the majority of the film has taken place and the bright blue skies of the airfield creates the impression of the inauguration of a new era. While the previous evening saw Steve persuading Curt of the benefits of leaving, and attempting to divest of himself of his relationship with Laurie, this new order sees Steve clutching his girlfriend, providing evasive assurances that he will join Curt the following year. The unlikelihood of his doing so is indicated through costume, as Steve's yellow shirt echoes the hue of Laurie's dress, and Terry's shorts, signalling his affiliation with the characters who will remain in Modesto.

The camera follows Curt onto the plane, moving the film's perspective away from Modesto, and into the future, before dissolving into a long shot of a plane as it moves across a cloudless, blue sky. With only the gentle whir of the engines heard in the background – the nostalgic sonic space of Modesto now far behind – the futures of the four male leads are slowly listed in sequence: "John Milner was killed by a drunk driver in December 1964; Terry Fields was reported missing in action near An Loc in December 1965; Steve Bolander is an insurance agent in Modesto, California; Curt Henderson is a writer living in Canada." For *Speed*, this epilogue demonstrates the film's fundamental conservatism by portraying the lasting significance of what seemed in the film to be relatively inconsequential behaviour (*Speed* 27). Thus, John is killed by someone who was driving dangerously, while Terry's comical clumsiness assumes an ominous quality in the light of his likely death in the Vietnam War. Steve's decision to postpone college that particular year means that he is destined never to leave Modesto. Equally, having departed, Curt never returns to the town.¹⁴

For Vera Dika, the epilogue portrays the "literal or symbolic" deaths of the film's male characters as a result of the Vietnam War (94). Dika's argument would cast the film as looking

back to an idealised period immediately prior to such a rupture. However, the lack of information about the futures of the three female characters, leads to an alternative explanation. Peter Lev argues that this omission might have been understandable in the case of Carol or Debbie, who we only encounter during the course of the evening. Yet Laurie is unquestionably one of the principal characters, introduced at the same time as the male leads at the beginning of the film. That neither she, nor Carol or Debbie are considered here is therefore the result of their gender, rather than their narrative significance (Lev 200). These characters, the film implies, would not have destinies of their own that could have been similarly squandered. While the loss of male potential is mourned here, the film suggests that the female characters never had any such potential that could be lost. This is not to say that these young women are wholly unremarked: following the contemplative silence of the epilogue, the credit sequence is once again accompanied by a pop track, one of which Carol would surely approve: The Beach Boys' "All Summer Long." Released in 1964, two years after the film's diegetic period, Dwyer argues that the film's ending literally "pushes the viewer out of 1962 further into the 1960s (77)." That Carol appears to have the film's last word hints at the social progress to emerge in later years. The supposed prelapsarian idyll of 1962 is not, therefore, to be mourned.

Concluding Remarks: Smoke gets in your eyes

American Graffiti's construction of the past is more complex than has hitherto been acknowledged. I began with the prevailing consensus that Lucas' film embodies both the nostalgia mood – the longing for the past – and the nostalgia mode – a flippant and insidious flattening of history that obscures "true" understanding of the past. Yet it was also observed that those who viewed the film at the time of its release reached rather different conclusions, and were attentive not only to its affectivity, but also to the richness, and personal vision of the world evoked within. A reconsideration of American Graffiti has become possible through attention to the film's textual details, which show that choices made by Lucas, from the hard-

shine paint of the cars' lacquer, to the music that pervades the film throughout, are far from arbitrary.

Feminist perspectives considering the film in retrospect have been significant to the reassessment of American Graffiti. Feminist arguments that nostalgia texts indulge in a desire to return to stable, clearly-defined gender roles chimed with work by scholars such as Fred Davis, for whom such films were always about a retrenchment from a present deemed to be more turbulent than the past. In contrast, through analysis of the film's heterosexual couples, Steve and Laurie, and Terry and Debbie, American Graffiti draws attention to, and disputes, the tacit belief that gender roles were ever clear and undisputed. More recent scholarship has shown that audiences' reaction to films is predicated on a variety of factors that include their knowledge of the period as well as their distance from it (Radner 141). It is in this way that we can view Carol, a character who has been subject to little discussion in the literature on American Graffiti, as a figure who embodies feminism's then-nascent Second Wave. Younger than the film's principal players, her precociousness, and embodiment of "newness" in her taste for music suggests that she will not be content with the vision of womanhood presented by Laurie or Debbie. The complexity of gender relations shown in American Graffiti deserves greater recognition than the clichés under which they have previously been dismissed.

The analysis has consequences beyond the reconsideration of American Graffiti. The complexity of the film's engagement with the past, and with gender in particular, calls for it to be considered anew as part of the American New Wave. As discussed at the beginning of this piece, it was initially received as such, and positioned alongside Five Easy Pieces and Bonnie and Clyde. Yet today, it is striking how infrequently it is discussed among such a pantheon. One reason for this is that unlike most of the directors associated with the era, George Lucas' work, perhaps especially with American Graffiti, has always intended a cross-generational appeal. He shares this disposition with Steven Spielberg, who is still more associated with

youth, and whose positioning in the American New Wave is similarly disputed. Bound up with the relaxation of the Motion Picture Code in 1968, and the concomitant increase in strong violence and sexual content, the American New Wave is often said to conclude with the release of Jaws (Spielberg, 1975), which marks the turn to the Blockbuster (Krämer 301). As a consequence, directors like Lucas and Spielberg, who are certainly products of this period, yet deploy their allusivity and inventiveness in an appeal towards youth as well as adult audiences, have been overlooked. Here, we also have to consider pre-existing biases against youth-oriented films, which have only recently been taken with the requisite seriousness.

There are also consequences for other nostalgia texts. Indeed, the analysis of the complexity of the representation of the past in American Graffiti – the supposedly paradigmatic nostalgia film – has shown that we need to be wary about deploying “nostalgia” uncritically to any text that represents the past. We have seen that Lucas is all too aware of the affective lure of nostalgia, while ultimately demonstrating that the early 1960s were far from idealised. An apt parallel with this ambivalent look back to the past might be the more recent Pride (Matthew Warchus, 2014). Set in 1985, Warchus’ film portrays the unlikely alliance between striking Welsh miners, and a gay rights group based in London. Showing abuses that were commonplace in the mid-1980s, the film conveys that equality has progressed considerably in the intervening years. Yet the film retains a nostalgic tone. What is sought, then, is a nostalgia for potential. That is, for a time in which a quest for civil rights promised to galvanise such groups, in a time when LGBT rights have largely been achieved. To return to American Graffiti, Lucas is portraying a nostalgia for a moment of possibility, before the mass movements of counterculture brought about substantial social progress. Rather than nostalgic, Lucas portrays a longing for the future of his own past.

¹ Jon Lewis (2003) observes that American Graffiti was the “highest-grossing, low-budget film in motion picture history,” until 1999, when it was bested by The Blair Witch Project (Eduardo Sánchez, Daniel Myrick, 1999). See Lewis (18)

² Roger Ebert, 20 years old in 1962, describes his experience of watching the film in 1973 as “a rush of feeling that wasn’t so much nostalgia as a culture shock.” See Ebert (n.pag).

³ For Christine Sprengler, Kennedy’s death brings about the end of the Fifties, the nostalgic construct brought about by the mythologizing efforts of the period itself, and reignited in the 1970s and 1980s. It is to be distinguished from the 1950s, which denotes the decade between 1950-1959 in all its complexity (39).

⁴ For further examples of scholars who have taken up Jameson’s ideas, see Speed (1998); Shumway (1999); Dika (2003); Shary (2005).

⁵ I refer to the distinction Sprengler posits between the Fifties and the 1950s as referenced above.

⁶ Laurie would also be placed in the former group, but she is not yet old enough to consider leaving Modesto.

⁷ Class divisions are made similarly apparent in Dirty Dancing. Set in 1963, though released in 1987, the working-class “entertainment staff” are expressly divided from the Ivy League educated waiters, who are allowed to flirt with the customers. Likewise, Dirty Dancing shows that the early 1960s are not to be mourned (Smith).

⁸ George Lucas based the character of John Milner on screenwriter John Milius, with whom he attended the University of South California. As Milius is reported to have said at the time, “I guess he saw me in that light, as I was a surfer going past my prime.” See Kline (72).

⁹ I have elaborated this point at greater length in Smith (2017).

¹⁰ That American Graffiti anticipates and looks forward to the forthcoming countercultural movements of the 1960s is indicated by the inclusion of these movements in the film’s sequel. Set in 1965, More American Graffiti (Bill L Norton, 1979) portrays the film’s characters participating in mass protests.

¹¹ Howard was also associated with wholesomeness and innocence in his character, Richie Cunningham, in Happy Days (ABC 1974-1984)

¹² The conclusion of Dirty Dancing also uses this technique, when Johnny (Patrick Swayze) puts on “(I’ve had) The Time of My Life,” which sees his reunion with Baby (Jennifer Gray).

¹³ See Krämer (67-8) for further discussion of the allusivity and impact of this film school generation.

¹⁴ The film suggests that Curt may be living in exile as a draft dodger, since would-be conscripts were not pardoned until 1977.

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Appendix: Images

Figure 1: Mel's Drive-In (*American Graffiti*, Universal Pictures, 1973)



Figure 2: John (Paul Le Mat) and his vibrant yellow Ford Deuce (*American Graffiti*, Universal Pictures, 1973)



Figures 3 and 4 Wolfman Jack as myth, and reality (*American Graffiti*, Universal Pictures, 1973)

